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# In the name of development, Goa losing its fields, hills and forests

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*Bit by bit, plot by plot, Goa is losing its fields, hills and forests in the name of development. No-development and eco-sensitive zones are being converted for construction activities, agriculture land and green cover are giving way to farmhouses and the realty sector. As the TCP dept goes on a "correction" spree, TOI does a deep dive into the debate between development and conservation*

This advertisement that appeared in local dailies is not an exception. Ads like this are the new normal in Goa and come with the promise of complete payment in 40 days, quicker than the delivery period for your favourite car. For a resource-scarce state, land is Goa's most valuable commodity.

From Assagao to Siolim, Morjim, Ashvem and Mandrem, and from Anjuna to Vagator, Goa's green and no-development zones are all up for grabs. From private real estate firms to movie stars from Bollywood and Tollywood, and from fashion designers to politicians, all have lined up for a slice of the six crore sqm of eco-sensitive land that town and country planning (TCP) minister Vishwajit Rane has put on the block.

With a mere 3,702 sqkm area, bracketed by verdant hills and palm-fringed beaches, it is no wonder that everyone wants an idyllic slice of Goa's tranquillity. But there is a finite amount of land. And it comes at a premium.

- The Land Conundrum

Since 1981, when Goa's policymakers and urban planners began drafting the Regional Plan 2001, the TCP department has tried to balance the need for housing with protection of the hills, fields, lakes and forests. The subsequent Regional Plan of 2011 was a disaster, suggesting that the TCP department was struggling to adhere to its role as a gatekeeper. This was followed by the Regional Plan of 2021 where reputed architect Charles Correa helped provide direction.

"In 2007, when policymakers and the state level committee began working on RP 2021, they realised that the coastal areas were overpopulated and had reached their carrying capacity. They decided to pivot to the hinterlands and rationalise the settlement zones along the coastal belt," said an urban planner and architect.

This rationalisation saw some areas, which were kept aside for residential purposes, being reverted to fields, orchards and eco-sensitive zones. Naturally, there were errors, says Panaji-based architect, Arminio Ribeiro.

Since then, the authorities have grabbed onto the errors to tinker with Goa's Regional Plan 2021, first keeping it in abeyance, then offering to correct the errors on a "case to case basis" and now finally scrapping all future planning.

Assagao, Siolim, Morjim, Ashwem, Mandrem, Anjuna and Vagator have become sought after destinations, giving the TCP added incentive to drop all pretence and serve up Goa's green zones to address the land scarcity conundrum. Reconvertin g agricultural land and orchards for "bespoke homes" and "landscaped private estates" is the new mandate.

- If You Can't Mend, Amend

In the guise of reforms and delivering justice, TCP minister Vishwajit Rane amended the Goa Town and Country Planning Act, 1974 and the Goa Land Development and Building Regulations, 2010.

Rane introduced Section 17(2) in the Goa Town and Country Planning Act, 1974, which gives the government unbridled powers to rectify any “inadvertent error that has occurred in the regional plan, and for correction of inconsistent or incoherent zoning proposals”. Within a month, more than 1.16 lakh sqm of environmentally fragile land has been converted and earmarked for construction.

And if one goes by Rane’s claims, six crore sqm of land is still on the drawing board to be reconverted from eco-sensitive land to settlement.

“The tinkering is all about giving additional powers to the authorities who prefer to decide on things on a case-to-case basis rather than looking at planning from a bigger perspective. You are now allowing construction on khazan lands and farmhouses in orchards and fields. It does bring in opportunities, some gains for the locals, but the TCP department needs to have a vision to balance it out,” said Ribeiro.

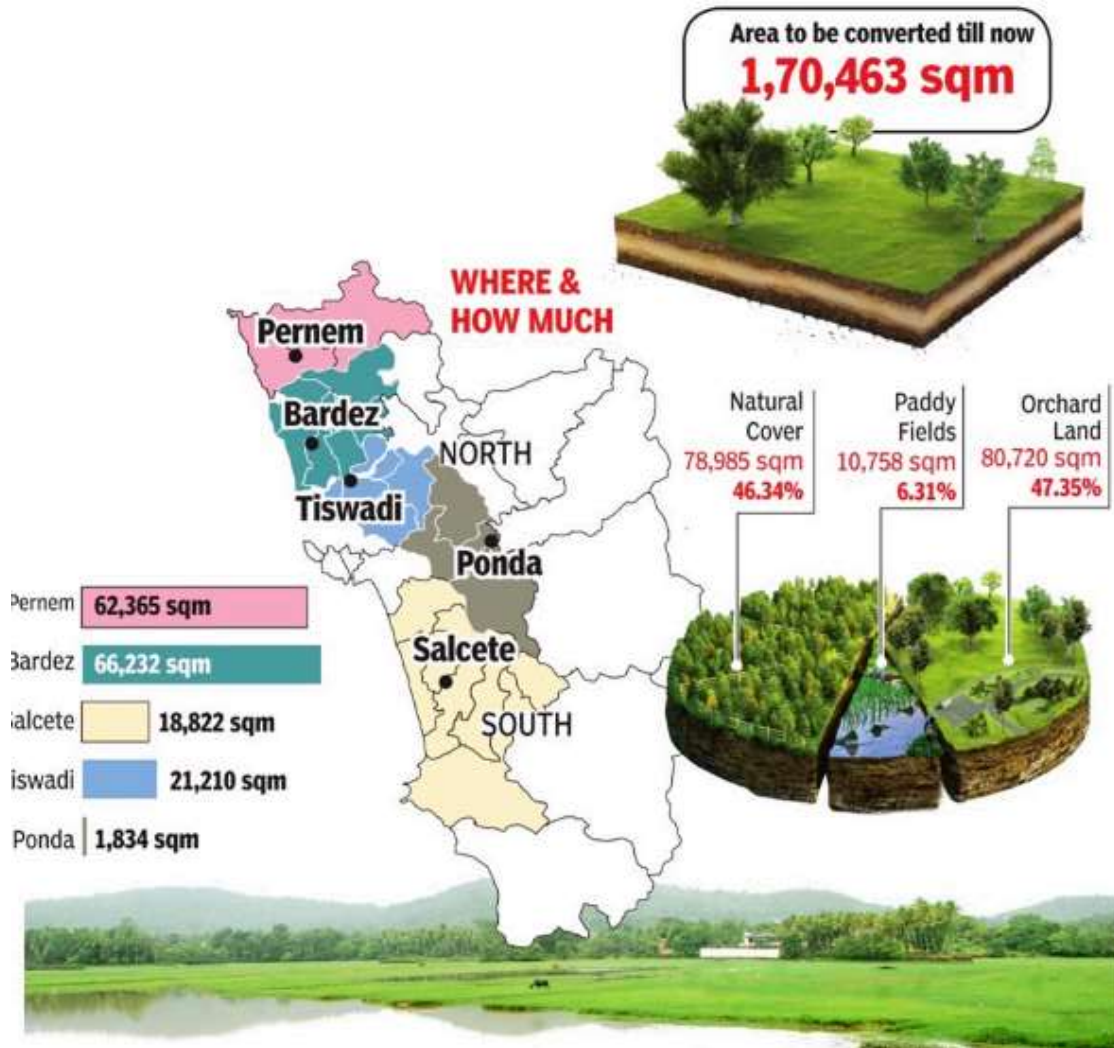
Justifying his decision for reconvertng green zones to allow construction activities, Rane had said: “There are several discrepancies in the RP2021, through which our people have been put through hardships. Large properties and settlement lands, some belonging to poor people, have been converted from settlement to natural cover, orchards, and non-development slopes in the name of rationalisation, depriving them of their right to put their land to developable use.”

Contrary to Rane’s claims that he is giving relief to poor people, records show that the beneficiaries are private real estate firms, movie stars from Bollywood and Tollywood, fashion designers and politicians.

Take for example the speed with which Hyderabad-based firm Gangareddy Infra Pvt Ltd got 37,000 sqm of orchards “corrected” within 17 days. Similarly, Telugu producer Konidela Ramcharan Tej got 7,000 sqm of land converted from orchard zone to settlement zone in Morjim. Luxive Estates LLP, Jaglax Realty and Jai Raghuvira Constructions feature on the list of owners whose lands have been corrected.

“A brief study of the 20 cases cleared till June 15 indicates that 52% of all changes were in favour of real estate

firms (89,000sqm), 42% were in favour of three individuals who are all listed as directors of real estate firms in the ministry of corporate affairs website (72,556sqm) and only 4.7% went to other individuals (8,000 sqm),” said architect Tahir Noronha , who is presently working with the city of Detroit, Michigan, as a planner.



- Crusader Turns Converter

When he took over as the TCP minister, Rane launched a crusade against illegal land conversion and claimed that 3.5 lakh sqm of eco-sensitive land was illegally converted to settlement. Now, a year later, he seems to be heading down the same path. His department is fast tracking the “correction” of paddy fields and natural cover to settlement zones using provisions under 17(2) of TCP Act.

Once a plot of land is classified as a settlement, real estate firms and brokers can initiate the process to develop a residential complex, row houses, villas and farmhouses.

“From what we hear, small politicians and TCP officials are making calls to people, offering to convert and monetise their land. All this is finally aimed at raising funds,” said Ribeiro.

- Goa’s Real Estate

With a cosmopolitan lifestyle, easy connectivity and largely unpolluted landscape, it’s easy to understand why Goa occupies a prominent place for high networth individuals. With a spacious villa still going for less than a luxury apartment in Delhi, it’s no surprise that the affluent and city-weary are keen to change their address in favour of the sunshine state.

“In terms of property prices and rental yields, Goa, specifically North Goa, has witnessed appreciations ranging from 50% to 100% over a 30-month cycle in under-construction projects. The extent of appreciation varies, depending on who the developer is. Rental yields in the region typically range from 5% to 10% per annum,” said Lindsay Bernard Rodrigues, chief executive officer and cofounder of Bennet and Bernard, a realty firm that focuses on luxury homes.

The annual Luxury Outlook Survey 2023 released by Sotheby’s India International Realty suggests that 61% of HNIs are keen to purchase real estate in 2023-24 with 30% of them looking for farmhouses and holiday homes.

Real estate analysts and property brokers, who call Goa a city or a Union territory, suddenly turn experts on the state's labyrinthine land norms. Catchwords such as sustainable living, holistic wellness and bespoke luxury are used for second homes in Goa. The investors love it and the TCP is buying it.

Taking a leaf out of the real estate marketing playbook, Rane is also mouthing the same keywords as he sugarcoats the recent amendments introduced by his department.

The TCP recently tweaked the Goa Land Development and Building Construction Regulations to allow cottages and villas — couched under the farmhouses category — to be built on agricultural lands. The same tweaks permit yoga centres and wellness projects to come up on plots that have significant tree cover.

Urban planners and environmentalists view these developments as part of a broad trend to cater to the surge in demand for luxury housing and wellness resorts in Goa, a trend that began decades ago but which boomed further after the pandemic.

- 'Perverse, Suspicious'

These “arbitrary zoning changes” in the regional plan, and to the Goa Land Development and Building Regulations are “perverse” and “suspicious”, say urban planners and environmentalists.

“The move by the government to correct ‘errors’ in the regional plan is suspect as most of the zone changes that are being allowed using this Section 17 (2) are large areas, which cannot conceivably be errors. Some of the changes allowed violate eco-sensitive zones and some others were in fact rejected earlier when proposed under Section 16B,” said Goa Foundation director Claude Alvares.

Ribeiro said if the development planning process continues to be an “individual controlled exercise” instead of a

statewide consultative process, Goa is heading for an ecological disaster. Aside from the strain on natural resources, the lack of a larger vision for the state will result in traffic congestion, high density population in small pockets, a strain on public amenities and a wide chasm between the rich and the poor.

“I am really worried about what is going to happen to Goa, whether it will remain unique,” says Ribeiro.

Planners and local stakeholders say that if the TCP wants to correct past errors, a new regional plan through a consultative process is the way to go forward. Till then, it is open season on Goa's green cover.

- LAWS OF THE LAND

- Cultivable land is land that is used for farming and horticulture, but does not include gardens attached to a building

- Regional plan indicates the phases for development, including the network for various forms of public transport and communication lines, conservation of natural resources and development of human activities. It is a broad demarcation of areas for agriculture, forests, industry, mining, urban and rural settlements and other activities such as sports and education

- Settlement area is a plot of land used for human residential purposes and includes gardens, grounds, garages and out-houses

- The Goa Regulation of Land Development and Building Construction Regulations have been tweaked to permit farmhouses to come up on agricultural land provided that paddy is not being grown on the land

Section 16B | Former TCP minister Vijai Sardesai had amended the TCP Act in 2018 to add Section 16B which

allowed the department to make changes in the regional plan by correcting typographical or cartographical errors based on applications received from people

Section 17(2) | TCP minister Vishwajit Rane, who earlier announced that all applications received under Section 16B were scrapped, introduced Section 17(2) which allows the chief town planner to carry out alteration/modification in the regional plan in bits and parts if the department finds “inadvertent errors”